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# METHODIST-CATHOLIC dialogues



UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

THIRTY YEARS OF MISSION AND WITNESS

The General Commission on Christian Unity and  
Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church • New York  
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# PREFACE: THIRTY YEARS OF MISSION AND WITNESS

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“**G**o therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). All Christians—United Methodists and Roman Catholics among them—are called to follow Christ; to bring his message of salvation, peace, and justice to the world; and to heal the divisions in the world and in the Church.

As Catholics and Methodists have worked together in mission and ministry in the United States and across the globe, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are called by the Spirit to conversion, to a change of heart. This conversion is first of all to Christ and his community, the Church. However, this calling to mission also calls us to unity among our divided churches.

As Catholics and United Methodists we have been in common mission together for many years, in local situations across the land and on regional, national, and global levels. To help our people to come to know one another better and to begin the ecumenical journey of conversion we have recently published *Yearning to Be One: Spiritual Dialogue Between Catholics and United Methodists*. We hope that

resource will stimulate local groups to bring members of our churches and other Christians into face-to-face conversation and to a zeal for the unity of the Church.

As churches we have also been engaged in technical theological dialogue to serve this unity we experience in spirituality and mission on the local level. In this short overview of the thirty years of dialogues—sponsored on the global level by the World Methodist Council and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and on the U.S. level by the General Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops—we hope to provide a resource to introduce the theological dialogues.

The journey toward the unity of the churches must be first founded on love and trust. However, as we build up our trust and love in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we move on to the more challenging issues that continue to keep us divided. Remarkable progress has been made toward resolving issues that once divided us. These dialogues deal with the careful, and often technical, discussions that are necessary if we are to achieve the full communion in faith, sacramental life, and witness together as churches for which we pray.

We are grateful to all who have participated in these dialogues, so much the work of the Spirit. We hope that reviewing these dialogues may lead some to explore the original texts of which this small resource is a summary. We ask you to join with us in prayer that these studies may ever deepen our understanding of one another and of the Gospel so that we come to that day when we can celebrate the full communion for which our Lord so fervently prayed.

Cochairs of the United States dialogue, 1993-2000

Bishop William Boyd Grove, *The United Methodist Church Ecumenical Officer of the Council of Bishops*

Bishop William Skylstad, *National Conference of Catholic Bishops Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs*

# INTRODUCTION

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Christian churches are called by Christ to stand together in mission to the world and to join with Christ in the prayer “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). Since 1966 Methodists and Catholics have taken up this mandate in a variety of contexts in the United States and around the globe.

In almost any ecumenical structure in which Catholics and Methodists participate, they provide unique leadership because of their numbers, their ability to exercise leadership in all of their congregations, and the mutual accountability of their ministers. This does not mean that Methodists or Catholics are without their own internal tensions that intrude into the ecumenical setting. However, Methodists and Catholics recognize that by their baptism, their confession of the Christian faith as attested in the Scriptures, and their common calling to mission, what binds them together is far greater than what divides them.

To further the gospel call toward greater visible unity, official dialogues have been commissioned for more than thirty years: in the United States between The United Methodist Church and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops; and on a global level, through the World Methodist Council and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for the Catholic Church. (Both traditions have also participated in numerous faith and order commissions across the world.) This brief overview of the dialogues is a contribution to the other dimensions of ecumenical

life: social witness, common evangelism, spiritual renewal, and collaborative efforts in the local community. After this introduction, we will survey the history of the dialogues on the global and U.S. levels and provide a summary of the issues of faith discussed.

Central to our ecumenical quest is a conversion of spirit to Christ, to Christ's call to be a member of the Church, and to Christ's prayer for the unity of the Church. This conversion entails getting to know and appreciate one another and one another's churches, recognizing the challenges to unity and attempting to resolve them. The dialogues are an occasion to appreciate the gifts of our traditions. We also seek to identify differences of conviction and to resolve them in truth.

Catholics and Methodists never divided from one another. Rather, the followers of John Wesley continued his mission of biblical and ecclesial renewal. In the United States, the followers adapted to the frontier by envisioning a form of Church and message best suited for "spread[ing] scriptural holiness over the land."

Roman Catholics tend to look to the theology and ecclesiology of John Wesley for an understanding of Methodism, which—because of its high Anglicanism, patristic base, and strong sacramentalism—seems like a common basis for moving forward. However, as the international dialogue has noted from the beginning, Wesley's *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (1749), his theology, and even his intent for the societies to remain within the Anglican Communion must be seen in light of the subsequent developments within Methodism. *The Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church calls for the Wesleyan tradition to be interpreted in light of current ecumenical understandings (p. 53). Catholics, on the other hand, see in their own Church a continuity with the church founded on the apostles and developing into its present form under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the remainder of this introduction, we will note the elements of full communion as they have been articulated in our World Council of Churches discussion. We will also articulate a specific framework for moving toward full communion as articulated by The United Methodist Church and the Catholic Church, and our hopes for the use of this overview.

The next section, “Our Pilgrimage Together,” will survey the six rounds of world-level dialogues and the five rounds of U.S. dialogues and their results. The fourth section, “What We Have Learned Together,” will briefly focus on the contents of these dialogues, by themes, to show how these dialogues interrelate in one unified process contributing to our pilgrimage toward full communion in the Church that Christ wills for us.

## FULL COMMUNION

Methodists and Catholics have worked together for thirty years (and Methodists for seventy years with the full array of Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches) to articulate a basis for Christian unity in the context of a movement of theological dialogue called “Faith and Order.” Among the results of these dialogues is a vision of what is necessary for a united Church.

Within the World Council of Churches (WCC), one such vision was articulated in *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*, a document from the 1991 Canberra Assembly. This vision can link the bilateral work of Methodists and Catholics to the wider work for the unity of the Church. Among other things, this WCC statement, *The Unity of the Church*, enumerates the specific elements needing resolution if full communion is to be achieved:

The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in [1] the common confession of the apostolic faith; [2] a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; [3] a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and [4] a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be [5] expressed on the local level and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action. In such communion churches are bound in all aspects of life together at all levels in confessing the one faith and engaging in worship and witness, deliberation and action. (Doc. 1)

This paragraph joins together elements that many see as essential for “full communion.” These are the elements we shall see developed in the dialogues between Methodists and Catholics.

Of course, these elements are also the subject of other ecumenical discussions, both in the World Council of Churches and in other church union conversations. *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia* articulates what Christians agree must be part of the Church, on the one hand, and where agreement must be reached if Christians are to be united, on the other. The 1991 WCC text also outlines the diversities that characterize churches in full communion, many of the achievements of the ecumenical movement, imperatives before the churches today in contributing to unity, and the spiritual dynamic at the center of God’s reconciling purpose among us.

## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Within their own lives, the churches speak more specifically about elements of full communion they see as necessary for the journey toward full communion. The 1968 General Conference statement of The United Methodist Church is a prophetic anticipation of the vision of communion (*koinonia*) that later emerged in the World Council of Churches (as described above) and in dialogue with the Catholic Church:

The unity we seek is the communion of all Christians in each place in the undeniable elements of Christian life and discipline, among which we would include the following: [1] the authority of God's revealed Word in Holy Scripture, [2] the governance of the Church by the Holy Spirit, [3] the Gospel of faith preached and heard and lived, [4] universal membership nurtured toward Christian maturity by the sacraments of grace and the fellowship of service, [5] the nurture of Christians in each new generation by the Christian tradition, [6] a representative ministry ordained for the sacramental and pastoral guidance of the pilgrim People of God, and [7] an ethic of disciplined love and justice in and for the whole human family. (Doc. 3)

This vision of communion was again affirmed by The United Methodist Church in its response to the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM):

The general understanding that the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ requires three conditions: [1] a common expression of the apostolic faith; [2] mutual recognition and acceptance of each communion's doctrines of baptism, eucharist and ministry; and [3] commonly accepted ways of deciding and acting together for life and mission in the world. (Doc. 6)

## THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Roman Catholic Church laid out its vision of the elements necessary for communion in the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*:

The communion in which Christians believe and for which they hope is, in its deepest reality, their unity with the Father through Christ in the Spirit. Since Pentecost, it has been given and received in the Church, the communion of saints. It is accomplished fully in the glory of heaven, but is already realized in the Church on earth as it journeys towards that fullness. Those who live united [1] in faith, hope and love, [2] in mutual service, [3] in common teaching and sacraments, [4] under the guidance of the pastors are part of that communion which constitutes the Church of God. This communion is realized concretely [5] in the particular Churches, each of which is gathered together around its Bishop. In each of these "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and alive." This communion is, by its very nature, universal. (Doc. 2)

A succinct focus on the elements necessary for dialogue was articulated in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *That They May Be One* in 1995, when he enumerated

areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved: (1) the relationship between Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God; (2) the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, an offering of praise to the Father . . . ; (3) Ordination . . . ; (4) the Magisterium of the Church . . . ; (5) the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church. (Doc. 4)

## COMMON VISION

The language may differ in the WCC, the United Methodist, and the Catholic lists of issues to be discussed and elements of division to be resolved. However, the substance is the same. For example, the World Council speaks of “conciliar forms of life and action” and “bound in all aspects of life together.” The United Methodist Church says “the governance of the Church by the Holy Spirit,” and the Catholic Church uses “the magisterium of the Church.” However, in all three formulations, the churches are seeking together to find the biblically warranted means of authority by which to proclaim the Gospel together and to hold one another accountable to the faith and mission of the Church to which we are called by the Holy Spirit.

Surveying these dialogues, one will note that all seven elements of the United Methodist list and the five areas lifted up by the pope have been touched upon in either the U.S. or global dialogues. In the context of the World Council of Churches and World Methodist Council dialogues, the three African American Methodist churches and some of the Wesleyan and Holiness churches have participated. The resources of these dialogues are a gift to all Christians seeking Christ’s will for the Church and its unity. In local discussions Methodists and Catholics from all points of view and traditions, along with other Christian traditions, are invited to participate.

Both of our churches are unalterably committed to the ecumenical movement; its penultimate goal of common witness, service, prayer, and action; and its ultimate goal of full communion. Thus, the dialogue has as its clear goal “a vision that includes the goal of full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life” (Doc. 11). “The revelation of the triune God is the source of the Church’s faith, the

Church's mission, and the Church's sacramental life. These are three essential ingredients in the full communion our commission has declared is the final goal of the dialogue" (Doc. 12).

As Pope John Paul II noted in *That They May Be One*, "a new task lies before us: that of receiving the results already achieved," a task that "must involve the whole People of God." These results are not to remain "statements of bilateral commissions but must become a common heritage" (Doc. 4). This brief survey should provide an introduction for those wishing to study the texts in more detail themselves and to derive resources for preaching, education, and prayer from their results.

# OUR PILGRIMAGE TOGETHER

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## WORLD-LEVEL DIALOGUES

Personal contacts were made between Methodist leadership and the Catholic Church during the course of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) by observers representing the Methodist churches. In 1966 the World Methodist Council authorized a dialogue between the two parties, which met for the first time in 1967. Six reports have been issued from this dialogue, which has occurred regularly since that time. The dialogue commission has produced its results for presentation at the World Methodist Council Assemblies and to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity every five years.

After a discussion of agenda and method, the first round—named *The Denver Report* after the place of the 1971 World Methodist Council Assembly—touched on the following themes: Christianity and the contemporary world, agreements for joint efforts in the world, spirituality, Christian home and family, Eucharist, ministry, and authority (Doc. 7).

The second round, *The Dublin Report* (1976), deepened some of the issues discussed in the first report and expanded the agenda: common witness, salvation today, spirituality, inter-church marriages, euthanasia, Eucharist, ministry, authority, and church union negotiations. Like the first report, it laid out general

areas of agreement without specific proposals for action in the churches (Doc. 8). George Tavard notes that these conversations were

focused on problems that commend themselves for their importance in the ecumenical movement in general, whether or not they are also close to the heart of historical Methodism. . . . In other words . . . the international dialogue between Methodists and Catholics wishes to serve the Church of Christ by contributing to the general reproachment between Protestants and Catholics. . . . To this end the participants select broad yet pointed problems to which they bring whatever light they can draw from a common reflection on the Methodist and the Catholic experience. (Doc. 18)

*The Honolulu Report* was characterized by a shift of methodology, becoming more focused on a specific issue between Methodists and Catholics and producing “Toward an Agreed Statement on the Holy Spirit” (Doc. 9). This and subsequent dialogues took on a more independent course. They began to rely less on other dialogues (like Faith and Order, or those in which Catholics have engaged with Anglicans or Lutherans) and to focus more upon particular themes. *The Honolulu Report* addressed the following: the Holy Spirit, Christian experience, authority in the Church, Christian moral decisions, and Christian marriage.

The fourth, *Towards a Statement on the Church*, addressed the following topics: sacraments, being called to unity, ways of being one, structures of ministry, and the Petrine office. As we shall note, this report did take into account the vision of *koinonia* that by this time had become central in ecumenical discussions (Doc. 10).

*The Apostolic Tradition* was the title of the fifth round. Under that theme it includes discussion of (1) faith: teaching, transmission and reception; word and Church; spirit and Church; pattern of faith; pattern of life; pattern of community; and (2) service: ministry and ministries; service of the Word; gift of the spirit; the Church, a living body; ordained ministry; and convergences and divergences (Doc. 11).

The sixth series, *The Word of Life*, covered (1) revelation: God’s self-giving, revelation in history, trinitarian revelation; (2) faith: faith by which we believe, faith which is believed, fruitfulness of faith, growth, fruits, and discernment; (3) mission: mission of the Church comes from God, word and act, mission and community, apostolic mission, mission and ecumenism, and mission and cultures;

and (4) sacramental life: communion—*koinonia*, communion through apostolic witness, basic expressions of communion, and the Church universal (Doc. 12).

## UNITED STATES DIALOGUES

There are Methodist-Catholic dialogues in Britain, but the most developed network of Methodist-Catholic relationships seems to be in the United States. While U.S. dialogue has not been as extensive as the global conversation, it has touched upon important ethical and relational issues. In fact, the attention to education and euthanasia has provided a reconciling perspective on two divisive issues in American public policy debates. United Methodists and Catholics are the largest U.S. communities represented by their churches in the Faith and Order Commissions of the World and National Councils of Churches. Although the discussions in those circles will not be reviewed here, they also made important contributions to the task of Christian reconciliation.

The first round of the U.S. dialogue commission began in 1966 and covered a wide range of issues: salvation, faith, good works, the Holy Spirit, the Church, government aid to education, religious concerns and the educational crisis, sacraments, ministries and communion. *Shared Convictions About Education* was the only document to be published from this round (Doc. 13).

The second series provided a more focused discussion and published *Holiness and Spirituality of the Ordained Ministry* (Doc. 14). The third round, reflecting the renewal of worship in both churches and the hopes for eventual sharing of Holy Communion, took up the issue of the Lord's Supper: *Eucharistic Celebration: Converging Theology—Divergent Practice* (Doc. 15).

The most recent round of formal theological dialogue turned to the theme of ministry at the end of life. Catholics and Methodists provide the most extensive health care networks in the country and have produced scholars and ministers with a wide range of reflection on these issues facing the churches. The text *Holy Living, Holy Dying* situated the divisive issue of euthanasia in the wider context of ministry to the suffering and their families and the broad theological agreement among the churches. This text offers a resource to all of the churches for bringing reconciliation to often heated discussions in the public policy arena (Doc. 16).

The fifth round of this dialogue has taken a different course. After a serious evaluation in 1993 of the global and U.S. dialogues, the dialogue members chose to spend a full round of the dialogue producing a congregational study guide to facilitate discussion and to invite Catholics and United Methodists into discussion and conversation locally. This study guide may encourage people to review the summary published here of the dialogues and even the texts themselves. Topics such as Mary, the Catholic papacy, Methodist connectionalism, and worship were discussed extensively in this round during the creation of the study guide *Yearning to Be One: Spiritual Dialogue Between Catholics and United Methodists*, which is available for local use (Doc. 17).

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED TOGETHER

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The discussions of the nature of the church, ethics, and salvation are developed to serve the churches and their reconciliation. They are not of such a maturity level to be put before the respective churches for evaluation and action. However, were Roman Catholic and Methodists to learn about one another in light of this material over the next quarter of a century, the whole ecumenical climate in the United States would undoubtedly be revolutionized. As one of the international dialogues notes,

Our concern, rather, has been to set out theological perspectives within which such more specific questions may be viewed. We propose these perspectives as consistent with the doctrinal positions of both churches, but not as a full exposition of them. (Doc. 11)

However, from the very beginning the development of these agreements has been seen against the background of the Church in the modern world, the contemporary situation, and the Church's call to mission. Spirituality has been a key and recurring theme. Extended treatment given to the doctrine of grace in the Wesleyan and Catholic formulations, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship of common witness and salvation today have yielded amazing areas of agreement.

Methodist understandings of the Church emerge from a commitment to and enthusiasm for mission. One reason for the separation from Anglicanism came from Methodist willingness to adapt with minimal theological resources and maximum openness to the needs of the newly emerging American culture. Evangelistically, this focus on mission was most successful. Methodism became the largest Protestant community in America for many years. For Methodists, the pragmatics of ecumenical action will usually be seen as superseding the value of dialogue, agreement, and sacramental exactitude.

Catholics will have similar feelings about the importance of mission. However, they will regard the sacramental, confessional, and ecclesiological issues as central and as being at the source of the unity the churches seek together. For this reason, even the agreements reached by officially appointed theologians will carry different weight and interest within our differing communities.

### **COMMON CONFESSION OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH**

#### ***Gospel, Scripture, Tradition, Faith***

As Roman Catholics and as Methodists we live from the same Gospel, the apostolic message of God's saving acts in Jesus Christ, and we share the same faith. This faith is rooted in the Scriptures, which are the common ground of our preaching and teaching as Christian churches. It is summarized by the creeds of the early church, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, which we confess regularly in our worship."

(Doc. 12)

Building on decades of dialogues among the churches that have included Methodists and Catholics, the polarization over Scripture and Tradition stemming from the Reformation has been largely overcome by recognizing Scripture as a witness to the Tradition of the Gospel, and the Church as bearing witness to the living Word as attested in Scripture (Doc. 13). "Tradition" is defined as "the living transmission of the Gospel of Christ, by manifold means, for the constant renewal of every generation." The Church is "the place where the Word of God is spoken, heard, responded to and confessed" and where "the Spirit abides." The

Church is the instrument “through” which the mission of the Triune God “continues” as the Church proclaims the Gospel to the world” (Doc. 11; cf. Doc. 12).

“The risen Christ speaks to us today,” provided preachers and hearers have learned “his language”; since “Christ was content to speak with other audiences and with later generations through those who became his first disciples. . . . The written word of Scripture” that contains the apostolic testimony remains the “permanent norm” of the “unbroken process of communication between God and human beings.” To be assured of the “continued hearing and assimilation of the Word of God. . . . We maintain communion with those who have heard and obeyed the Word before us” (Doc. 11).

### **Salvation**

The early U.S. dialogue took up questions of salvation, justification, sanctification, good works, and glorification. However, the dialogue found such agreement that the members did not feel the need to submit a report (Doc. 13). Interestingly enough, Methodists and Catholics have taken up the question of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ in the context of discussion of the Holy Spirit. This seems to stem from “the central place held in both traditions by the ideal of personal sanctification, growth in holiness through daily life in Christ” (Doc. 7).

Close agreement is found regarding justification, regeneration, and sanctification. These are matters that have historically divided many Protestants with Catholics:

The Holy Spirit is present and active within us throughout the entire experience of conversion which begins with an awareness of God’s goodness and an experience of shame and guilt, proceeds to sorrow and repentance, and ends in gratitude for the possession of a new life given us through God’s mercy in Jesus Christ. Justification is not an isolated forensic episode, but is part of a process which finds its consummation in regeneration and sanctification, the participation of human life in the divine. (Doc. 9)

John Wesley and the Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563) concur in their emphasis on the prevenience of grace:

Always it is the Spirit's special office to maintain the divine initiative that precedes all human action and reaction. . . . In the restoration [of the sinner to a right relationship with God through the atoning work of Christ], both the initiative, the agency and the consummation is the ministry of the Holy Spirit as he brings Christ to us and leads us to him. When a sinner is led to Christ and receives him, he is reborn and given the power to turn away from a life curved back upon itself towards a "new life," opened out to love of God and neighbor. (Doc. 9)

## COMMON SACRAMENTAL LIFE

As the company of those who have been incorporated into Christ and nourished by the life-giving Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), the church may analogously be thought of in a sacramental way. Precisely as the body of Christ and the community of the Holy Spirit, the church may be spoken of "as a kind of sacrament, both as an outward manifestation of God's grace among us and as signifying in some way the grace and call to salvation addressed by God to the whole human race." Constituted by God's saving grace, the church becomes the instrument for extending the divine offer as widely as the scope of God's eternal purpose for humankind. . . . In such an approach, the sacraments of the church may be considered as particular instances of the divine mystery being revealed and made operative in the lives of the faithful. Instituted by Christ and made effective by the Spirit, sacraments bring the mystery home to those in whom God pleases to dwell. (Doc. 12)

### Baptism

By baptism and the faith in Christ which it signifies, Catholics and Methodists already enjoy a certain measure of ecclesial communion. The purpose of the dialogue between us to increase and deepen our relationship until we reach sufficient agreement in the Christian truth that our common baptism can without equivocation be completed in our mutual participation in the meal to which the one Lord invites us and all his followers. The unity we seek to promote is not solely for our own enjoyment but for the sake of a credible witness to the reconciliation that God in Christ has wrought for the world and therefore among humankind. (Doc. 12)

## Holy Communion

Since the goal of sacramental communion is so central to this dialogue, both points of difference and common ground have needed to be clarified. In ecumenical life, the practice of Eucharistic sharing is based on two principles that are considered founded in the biblical witness:

1. Sharing at the Lord's Table builds up the unity of the Church and therefore is to be commended as a *means* of building unity.
2. On the other hand, the celebration of the Eucharist is the *culmination* of our unity in one Church and therefore is appropriate as a witness to full agreement in our recognition of one another as churches with the accompanying affirmations that requires.

The “symbol of one bread designates not only the unity of the sacrament of the Eucharist, but also beyond that the unity of the whole Church” (Doc. 15; cf. Doc. 12). Methodists and Catholics have struggled as to how to proceed: Can the common table build us up, or is it the sign of the culmination of our unity?

Methodists emphasize the first of these principles by practicing open communion, welcoming “baptized communicant members of other communions who desire to come” (Doc. 8). At the same time, Methodists do not think it fitting for Christians “to receive communion in any denomination at random, for communion with Christ is linked with membership of a local church” (Doc. 8). Catholics emphasize the second principle, seeing the sharing of Holy Communion as appropriate to celebrate full unity in faith, sacramental life, and decision making. Pastoral exceptions are made, in Catholic pastoral practice, in particular cases of spiritual need, when there is sufficient common faith, and where a proper disposition exists. However, for the churches’ work on the theological basis for Eucharistic agreement, these dialogues are essential. Within the dialogue sessions the participants have experienced deep pain at the separation caused by these different understandings of the Eucharist.

Agreement on the Eucharist is seen in the dialogue to have wide implications: “Proper and adequate understanding of true celebration of the Eucharist will shed light on doctrines about ministry and authority, and would alter the procedure of simply applying antecedent understandings of ministry and authority to

issues in sacramental theology” (Doc. 15). The link within worship, especially between the Eucharist and the Christian life (“namely our life of service as Christ’s body in the world”), is essential in both churches. The U.S. dialogue has also identified the divergences in popular piety, understanding of the Eucharist, and the converging texts and forms of Eucharistic celebration, especially in the United Methodist and Catholic churches (Doc. 15).

### ***Real Presence***

Catholics who speak warmly of the Wesleys’ Eucharistic hymns nevertheless have observed that “few Methodists would hold the doctrine of the Real Presence in any sense akin to the Catholic meaning.” Secondly, interest was shown in “recent Roman Catholic writings on ministry, in which reflection on ordinary and extraordinary ministries seem to have many points of contact with the original Methodist situation” (Doc. 8).

Methodists and Catholics can “affirm as the primary fact the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the Mass, or the Lord’s Supper, a reality that does not depend on the experience of the communicant,” although “it is only by faith that we become aware of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.” This is a “distinctive mode or manifestation of the presence of Christ,” although “the presence in the Eucharist for the Methodists is not fundamentally different from the presence of Christ in other means of grace, e.g., preaching” (Doc. 7). The Eucharistic bread and wine are “efficacious signs of the body and blood of Christ,” although the two parties differ over the “transformation” of the elements, which is for Catholic teaching a change in their “inner reality,” whereas Methodists understand them to acquire “an additional significance” (Doc. 8; cf. Doc. 15).

An understanding of the “manifold presence of Christ made real by the Holy Spirit” has also contributed to better mutual understanding (Doc. 15).

### ***Sacrifice***

Methodists and Catholics agree that the sacrificial language of the Eucharistic celebration refers to “the sacrifice of Christ once-for-all,” to “our pleading of that sacrifice here and now,” to “our offering of the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” and to “our sacrifice of ourselves in union with Christ who offered himself to the Father.” Catholics “are also accustomed to speak of the sacrifice of the Mass as something which the Church offers in all ages of her history” (Doc. 8).

Catholics explain that this does not “add to” or “repeat” Christ’s sacrifice but “makes present in a sacramental way the same sacrifice.” “For some Methodists,” however, “such language would imply that Christ is still being sacrificed. Methodists prefer to say that Christ has offered one sacrifice for sins and now lives to make intercession for us, so that we in union with him can offer ourselves to the Father, making his sacrificial death our only plea” (Doc. 8). “The Church’s offering of Christ’s sacrifice does not repeat the death, but rather proclaims and shows forth the redemptive mystery of Christ’s self-giving for us” (Doc. 15).

Agreements in the wider ecumenical circle of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [1982]) and the responses of Methodist and Catholic churches create a solid base for moving forward on the Lord’s Supper. All agree that the Eucharistic memorial (*anamnesis*) is “not a mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the Church’s effectual proclamation of God’s mighty acts” (Doc. 8; cf. Docs. 15, 6).

Both the international and U.S. dialogues note the convergence of the liturgical texts of Methodists and Catholics, a renewal of the Eucharistic faith and Eucharistic prayers among Methodists, and “a renewal in the theology and practice of the ministry of the word” in Catholicism (Doc. 8; cf. Doc. 15). Differences in understanding of common texts, in the popular piety of Methodist and Catholics, and in Eucharistic devotional life were also explored. Agreement among scholars or even in prayers used for worship does not necessarily mean mutual understanding among our people or even the same faith in the sacrament.

### ***Ministry***

One of the reasons why Eucharistic hospitality is not yet possible involves disagreement over who is authorized to preside at the Lord’s Table.

There is a fundamental agreement on the principle that “Jesus as the One through whom the ministry, whether sacramental or otherwise, is both identified and ultimately authorized. The minister participates . . . by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . in Christ’s ministry, acts in Christ’s name” (Doc. 7). Christ’s earthly and continuing ministry is reaffirmed by both as “the fundamental ministry,” in which those who are called and ordained to “special ministry” within the whole people of God are given a share by the Spirit so that they may “represent Christ.” It is agreed that “the Church’s apostolicity involves continuous faithfulness in

doctrine, ministry, sacrament and life to the teaching of the New Testament,” and that “in considering the ordained ministry of another Church we use this faithfulness as our criterion” (Doc. 8).

Methodists, while “not claiming apostolic succession in the sense of the Roman Catholic Church” (Doc. 10), “can regard a succession of ordination from the earliest times as a valuable *symbol* of the Church’s continuity with the Church of the New Testament, though they would not use it as a *criterion*” (Doc. 8).

Both Catholics and Methodists “see the central act of the ordained ministry as presiding at the Eucharist in which the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care is perfected” (Doc. 8). That vision made possible an affirmation of the

common priesthood of the faithful: Roman Catholics and Methodists agree that by ordination a new and permanent relationship with Christ and his Church is established. The ordained minister is called and enabled by the Holy Spirit to be the representative person who focuses in his [or her] ministry the manifold ministries of the whole Church. He [or she] is a sign of the Gospel and of the oneness of Christ’s Church, both to the Church and to the world; an ambassador of Christ who bids men [and women] to be reconciled to God and declares to them the forgiveness of sins; a priest who embodies the priesthood of all believers in which he [or she] shares, and by his [or her] ministry serves and sustains it. (Doc. 8; cf. Doc. 14)

In practice the Methodists have divergent understandings of ministry and are searching among themselves for common agreement. Within The United Methodist Church, there is considerable discussion on the need for focused attention on the theology of ordination.

The dialogue goes on to situate continuity in ministry in the wider context of continuity in the apostolic faith and life of the Church. “Catholics and Methodists are at one in seeing in a divinely empowered ministry the guidance of the Holy Spirit and are moving in the direction of greater shared understanding of the nature of ordination and of the structure of the ministry in regard to the responsibility to teach and to formulate the faith.” Both see ordination as “an effective

sign by which the grace of God is given to the recipient for the ministry of word and sacrament,” which Catholics call “sacramental” (Doc. 11; cf. Doc. 14).

The mutual recognition of ministry will be achieved not only by Methodists and Catholics having reached doctrinal consensus but it will also depend upon a fresh creative act of reconciliation which acknowledges the manifold yet unified activity of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages. It will involve a joint act of obedience to the sovereign Word of God. (Doc. 11)

The question is sometimes raised as to why the ordination of women has not been treated in detail. The gradual process selected by the international dialogue; plus the fact that those involved have not yet developed concrete proposals for mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries; added to the presence of other church-dividing questions such as apostolic succession, a common understanding of episcopacy/presbyterate, or the relationship of ordination to the Lord’s Supper—all of these factors indicate that this dialogue is actually in its early stages. The period of exploration of common ground has seemed necessary before taking on the variety of church-dividing issues around ministry, including gender. However, there is no question that everyone involved is aware of these issues that lie before us.

The 1976 U.S. dialogue, however, did briefly address the role of women: “Essential to [the] wholeness [of the ordained ministry] is the recognition of the importance of the role of women in the Church. Such concern encompasses the need of the two churches to work toward full utilization of and respect for women in all forms of ministry” (Doc. 14).

## **COMMON GOVERNANCE OF THE CHURCH**

### ***The Nature of the Church***

We are aware that before these dialogues began there were still Methodists who believed that “the Catholic Church is not part of the Christian body” (Doc. 11). Some Methodists still may carry those beliefs. Until Vatican II Catholics had an exclusivist view of the Church, a view that did not recognize ecclesial reality in

Methodist or other Reformation churches. The dialogue has made it clear that “for its part, the Roman Catholic Church certainly includes Methodists among those who, by baptism and faith in Christ, enjoy ‘a certain though imperfect communion with the Catholic Church;’ and it envisages Methodism among these ecclesial communities which are ‘not devoid of meaning and importance in the mystery of salvation’” (Doc. 11). While few remember the days of mutual exclusion, understanding the new positive appreciation of one another is an essential step before other church-dividing issues can be resolved. We all need to make clear how far we have come in recognition of one another.

Both Methodist and Catholic ecumenical initiatives, taken together and with their other partners, can be seen within the vision of the wider ecumenical discussions (we seek one common understanding of the Church to encompass our diversity in a united Church). The United Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States can be seen in its context of the international dialogue, which has been most productive.

As noted before, the goal of this dialogue is full communion, *koinonia*. The theological base of this communion is articulated:

We have found that *koinonia*, both as a concept and an experience, is more important than any particular model of Church union that we are yet able to propose. . . . For believers it involves both communion and community. It includes participation in God through Christ in the Spirit by which believers become adopted children of the same Father and members of the one Body of Christ sharing in the same Spirit. And it includes deep fellowship among participants, a fellowship which is both visible and invisible, finding expression in faith and order, in prayer and sacrament, in mission and service. Many different gifts have been developed in our traditions, even in separation. Although we already share some of our riches with one another, we look forward to a greater sharing as we come closer together in fully unity. (Doc. 10)

Obviously, Roman Catholics and Methodists share a common concern regarding the church universal as an expression of communion in Christ. But they differ widely in their beliefs about the means which God

has given to attain or preserve this goal. These differences may be the greatest hindrances on the way to full communion. (Doc. 12)

### **Teaching Authority**

The dialogue has given particular attention to the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit in the authority of the Church is grounded in the doctrine of the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity; in the Spirit's role in the justification, sanctification, and formation of the community; and in the Spirit's informing of the Church's mission. It is the Spirit that is the grounding of the Church's authority and the basis for moral decisions, through whatever means it is exercised, whether it is a conference or council of the Church, bishops, the pope, or the individual conscience (Doc. 9).

Both Methodists and Catholics realize the importance of the Church's ability to speak with confidence about the Word of God and its embodiment in the Christian tradition. Methodists have traditionally avoided words like "infallibility" for the authority of the Church, under the Holy Spirit, to discern the truth of the Gospel. While both churches have used "inerrancy" in their discussions of Scripture, the word causes certain problems because of narrower definitions, in the American situation, than are used in either Catholicism or Methodism.

The international dialogue suggests an approach to some of these difficult terms: "We believe that emotions surrounding such relatively modern terms as infallibility and irreformability can be diminished if they are looked at in the light of our shared doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit" (Doc. 9). "God . . . enables the Church, by the Holy Spirit, so to declare the truth of divine revelation that his people may know the way of salvation"; and that "the Scriptures bear permanent witness to the divine revelation in Christ and are normative for all subsequent tradition" (Doc. 10).

Methodist governance is conciliar, with a connectional form of communion that makes conferences at various levels of church life the basis for decision making. The Catholic Church recognizes the conciliar tradition of the Church but places the episcopacy and the role of the bishop of Rome as an essential element in this conciliarity. Together those involved in dialogue are able to articulate the importance of ecumenical councils:

Properly understood the decisions of the ecumenical councils which met in the first centuries command assent throughout the whole Church, and there is no reason to think that at the end of the patristic era God stopped enabling his Church to speak in such a way. (Doc. 10)

The discernment of the truth of the Christian faith includes a process of response by the People of God, the reception which necessitates “careful listening to the insights of others,” as well as prophetic and pastoral roles for teaching offices (Doc. 12).

### **Oversight/Episcopacy**

While some Methodist churches around the world have bishops like the Catholic church, the dialogue has reviewed other ways of understanding the relations of governance in Methodist-Catholic understandings: “From one perspective, the history of John Wesley has suggested an analogy between his movement and the religious orders within the one Church. . . . The different religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, while fully in communion with the Pope and the bishops, relate in different ways to the authority of Pope and bishops. Such relative autonomy has a recognized place within the unity of the Church” (Doc. 7).

“The disciplined life of the early Methodists, aimed at renewing a lax Church, set standards for the whole of Methodism which have found Roman Catholic parallels more often in the early life of religious foundations such as the Jesuits” (Doc. 7). The World Methodist Council’s Historical Society held a consultation with the Benedictines that also drew upon this connection.

Catholics and Methodists can agree that “central to the exercise of *episcopé* (the biblical notion of oversight, personalized as *episcopos* [bishop]) is the task of maintaining unity in the truth” and that “teaching is,” therefore, “the principal part of the exercise of *episcope*” (Doc. 11). However, the role of episcopacy in the ministry, as noted above, is still unresolved. There are different emphases as well in speaking of the bishops’ roles in the oversight of the Church, with the Methodists emphasizing a conference form of conciliarity and Catholics insisting on the personal role of the bishops and their communion with the bishop of Rome as essential to the teaching office and governance of the Church. The question of the role of episcopacy in apostolic continuity and in serving worldwide communion continues to be a fruitful area of discussion.

“Ministerial authority needs to be conceived and practiced as service, not as dominion” (Doc. 14).

### **Primacy**

There are neither extended explications nor proposals for the role of the bishop of Rome among the bishops for Methodists and Catholics in full communion. However, the dialogue does provide some common historical and biblical perspectives (Doc. 10). There are important comments on the subject:

Papal authority, no less than any other within the Church, is a manifestation of the continuing presence of the Spirit of Love in the Church or it is nothing. Indeed it should in its exercise be pre-eminently such a manifestation. It was declared at Vatican I [1870] to be “for the building up and not the casting down of the Church.” (Doc. 9)

Methodists accept that whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole of Christ’s Church must by that very fact be God’s will for his Church. A universal primacy might well serve as focus of and ministry for unity of the whole church. . . . In that case Methodists might justify such an acceptance on different grounds from those that now prevail in the Roman Catholic Church. (Doc. 10)

During the 1995-98 U.S. dialogue, there was extensive discussion of *That They May Be One*, the 1995 encyclical of Pope John Paul II, and his offer to discuss the exercise of the papacy with other Christian leaders, including Methodists, to understand how the office can better serve the unity of the Church. Many United Methodists expressed appreciation for the tone and substance of that encyclical.

## **ETHIC OF DISCIPLINED LOVE**

### **Mission**

Mission has been a recurrent theme in the dialogue and is identified as an element constitutive of a communion which would include Methodists and Catholics: “Because God wills the salvation of all men and women, he enables the Church by the Holy Spirit, so to declare the truth of the divine Revelation in Jesus

Christ that his people may know the way of salvation” (Doc. 10). Mission, more than anything else, is at the heart of Methodist ecclesiology.

The Gospel of reconciliation requires a reconciled and reconciling community. The Christian churches are not yet able to carry out God’s mission in unity, and this is a serious obstacle to mission. We acknowledge gratefully the fruits that our ecumenical relationships have brought in building up our communities for mission and in the missionary activity of our churches. Our churches should take every opportunity for cooperation, and work and pray to overcome the difficulties which stand in the way. We should explore the possibilities for cooperation in service and, whenever possible, in proclamation. The more we overcome differences in doctrine and polity, the stronger will be our witness and the easier it will be to avoid even the suggestion of proselytism. Nearly thirty years of dialogue between Catholics and Methodists have revealed sufficient agreement in faith for our churches to recognize integrity and faithfulness in each other’s proclamation of the Gospel. While large areas of agreement between Roman Catholics and Methodists about our responsibilities in society make much common action possible, differences remain concerning some areas of personal and social ethics. A careful and responsible dialogue about those differences would be fruitful, not only for our churches but for our mission in society. (Doc. 12)

Mission is one of the most immediate and practical ways in which Catholics and Methodists can manifest their common faith in the communities where they live. For both churches mission includes outreach to the unchurched and alienated. It includes prophetic witness on the issues of the day. It entails social service in concern for education, the poor, health care, and the environment. Common mission projects by congregations can include educational work together, community service, and study of and response to the challenges of the neighborhood. In many communities there is the possibility of training together those who will help new Christians come into the churches.

### **Ethical Principles**

The U.S. dialogue concentrated its treatment of an ethical issue on a pastoral context: *Holy Living, Holy Dying*. This dialogue focused on a common range of ethical methods relying on Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. It was able to

affirm that “all life is a gift of God,” that humans are “called in community to realize the divine purpose of living which is to love God and one another,” and that the incarnation of Jesus Christ “reaffirms” God’s value of all human life. “The Christian community as a whole must be engaged in promoting health, in healing suffering, and in being present with the dying” (Doc. 16).

From these principles the participants in the dialogue are able to say together: The “direct intentional termination of innocent human life, either of oneself or another, has been generally treated in Christian tradition as contradictory to such stewardship [of life] because it is a claim of absolute dominion over human life.” The “obligation to employ life-sustaining treatments ceases when the burdens (physical, emotional, financial, or social) for the patient and the care givers exceed the benefits to the patient.” Christian care “engages our biblical and doctrinal understanding with the wisdom of new knowledge about human life and with our own experience of the reality of disease and death.” The “application of excessive procedures” available and encouraged by the “ingenuity of medical technology does not always reflect good stewardship because it does not serve the purpose for which God gave life. . . . The ultimate purpose of our life is union with God in the community of the risen Christ” which will bring “bodily and spiritual healing” and “perfect wholeness and holiness” (Doc. 16).

In the context of these and other, more detailed common ethical principles and pastoral approaches, the dialogue outlines some disagreements on euthanasia, suicide, and the principle of “exceptionless norms.” Further divergences in pastoral practices, like the anointing of the sick and reconciliation, are noted (Doc. 16; cf. Doc. 8). Following the dialogue, the United Methodists developed the results of the study in different directions and created an additional resource for use with The United Methodist Church.

### **The Contemporary World**

Modern scientific, political, economic, and cultural realities around the globe bring before Christians ever newer challenges not anticipated in the Scriptures or in early church teaching. Methodists and Catholics are called to work together to understand the world today and to respond in responsible Christian ways. These new and challenging concerns are best responded to together, ecumenically, with common resources from our faith life, academic resources, and church communities.

Since the church is made up of human beings, its growth in understanding takes place through human interaction. Christians exercise their freedom in creative dialogue with the world. Fruitfulness occurs not only as the result of the church's own internal pondering on its origin and destiny but also in response to external stimuli. The perception of the truth grows and is tested by the challenges of successive ages. (Doc. 12)

The Church often enters into discussion with different schools of thought as it considers new theories, questions, and discoveries. It listens to friends, rivals, and enemies. But there are times when it must also resist ideas that are opposed to the Gospel. Revelation itself provides the motivation and guidance for this ministry of the word. (Doc. 7; cf. Doc. 8)

### **Spirituality**

Methodists and Catholics have easily affirmed together “the importance of a life style which authentically derives from relationship with the Spirit of Christ . . . [and] the vocation of the Christian community as a whole and of each person to accept the gift of holiness and to employ it as God intends.” “God’s holiness is communicated to the Church.” It is a “gift derived from and dependent on God” and a “task” calling the Church’s members to serve (Doc. 14).

By the “Spirit of adoption” the children of God are able to call with confidence on the merciful Father, and by the same Spirit the faithful are guided to a knowledge of the truth and to an obedience in which the fruit of the Spirit is manifested. “Holiness in heart and life” represents a convergence between John Wesley and “the mainstream of Catholic spirituality,” a convergence that could have significant implications “for the future of the cause of Christian unity” (Doc. 9; cf. Doc. 12).

Methodists and Catholics share together around the world in prayer, retreats, bible study, and dozens of other ways in which they enrich their spiritual life together. At their best, Methodists and Catholics aspire to an understanding of the Holy Spirit in our personal lives that is oriented toward experience and toward mission. A vision of God’s justice and peace for the world is an integral part of how we look, together, at what the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives and in the Church. We celebrate together those who have gone before us in the faith, especially those who have given their lives for the Gospel.

# CONCLUSION

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From the very first of the international reports there has been a call for communication and the suggestion that Catholic dioceses and Methodist conferences set up joint commissions to evaluate these agreements, to make suggestions on them to the appropriate authorities, and to communicate their findings in appropriate ways through their congregations. Hopefully this summary and the study guide provided by the fifth round of the U.S. dialogue will facilitate this initiative.

Wesley spoke, in his famous sermon, of "The catholic [by which he meant ecumenical] spirit." His heirs in our day have given admirable witness to the pioneering impulse. Methodists and Catholics have a great mission of reconciliation before us. For the results so far developed we can be grateful, and for the hoped-for full communion we can continue to pray. In the meantime, we can study and spread throughout the churches these results until they become a common heritage.

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